

SEEDS OF CONTROVERSY

18 incinerator protesters rounded up for planting garden

By DAVID SCHWAB

Eighteen environmental activists were arrested and charged with illegal dumping yesterday after they planted a large flower garden across the street from a sewage treatment plant in an industrial area of Newark.

About 50 demonstrators, many of them local residents, children and senior citizens, had gathered to protest outside the barbed wire fences surrounding the plant of the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission. They were joined by representatives from the environmental group Greenpeace.

The demonstrators carried hand-lettered signs and potted plants. The plants were supposed to symbolize their opposition to the agency's plans to build an incinerator to dispose of sewage sludge, a process critics say can release toxic emissions into the air. The demonstrators insisted the sludge can be treated and used for agricultural purposes.

During the demonstration, two rented dump trucks backed onto the sidewalk area and the demonstrators tried to prove their point.

The trucks were loaded with a dark brown composting material the organizers said was produced using treated sewage from a sewerage plant in Philadelphia. They bought it in bulk for about \$200 at a landscaping firm in Somerset County.

One truck dumped its load and the protesters, armed with shovels, began hurriedly planting orange geraniums, pink chrysanthemums and three green shrubs. Several police officers who had been watching the demonstration promptly ordered them to stop.

A young woman driving a second bright yellow dump truck could not get it to dump, so several activists jumped on top and began shoveling the compost onto the grass. To the cheers of their comrades, they continued shoveling, ignoring the police gathered below.

Shortly, police reinforcements arrived and patrol cars were positioned in front of the dump trucks. The demonstrators set about 100 plants in a flower bed measuring 60 feet long. Then they were arrested and led away to police cars and a police van.

Police seized the keys to the two trucks, folded up the protest signs and confiscated, as evidence, eight shovels and a rake.

"No matter what they are dumping, they are still dumping," said Sgt. Michael D'Immacenzo, who headed the police effort. He said illegal dumping in Newark was a big problem.

In fact, a sign on the fence directly over the garden advertised a \$50 reward for those giving information leading to the arrest and conviction of illegal dumpers.

Nearly all of those arrested were members of Greenpeace, whose boat was docked in Port Newark as part of a four-month campaign to highlight environmental problems along the East Coast. Also arrested was Arnold Cohen, a Newark resident and long-time community organizer.

One of the Greenpeace representatives was Andrew Tirpok, 23, of Flemington. Others came from New York, Massachusetts, Philadelphia, Washington and California.

All were being held in a police lockup in Newark until they could be arraigned in municipal court and bail could be set. The penalty for illegal dumping is 30 days in prison, a \$1,000 fine or both.

Greenpeace activists are accustomed to being arrested for such things as getting in the way of nuclear powered submarines or whaling boats or chaining themselves to smokestacks.

Scott Sederstrom of Boston, a Greenpeace representative who headed



Local residents join members of Greenpeace in planting a flower garden with composted sewage at a protest against sludge incineration in front of the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission plant in Newark



Environmental activists protesting in front of a sewage treatment plant in Newark are led away by police

the gardening effort, was asked as he sat in the back of a police car whether he was worried about being arrested.

"I'm more worried about what will happen if they build a sludge incinerator here," he replied. He said he had been arrested four other times.

But some of the demonstration organizers said they were shocked.

"It's really ludicrous that the police overreacted," said Fred Munson, a Greenpeace organizer. "The real issue is the toxics. That is the crime to us."

Victor DeLuca, director of the Ironbound Community Corp., which for years has been active in environmental protests in the Ironbound section of Newark where the plant is located, watched in frustration as the protesters were led away.

"If anything they made the area look nicer," he said of those arrested.

A number of local residents who watched were also upset, even though they were not arrested.

Mariaros DaCosta, an Ironbound resident, said she could not understand why nearly 10 police officers quickly appeared to uproot a gardening effort when, she added, it can take police several hours to respond to a burglary call.

"All we are doing is planting a garden," she said. "With all the car thefts, they come for a garden?"

Her mother, Anna DaCosta, 77, was distraught that police had seized her shovel.

"They have my shovel," she repeated over and over. "I'm on fixed income and I use it in my garden." Later she was taken by ambulance to the hospital. Her daughter said she has had trouble breathing.

Protesters oppose plans to build

the incinerator and say other methods should be examined, including that used in Philadelphia where treated sludge is used to make compost. According to protesters, 15 other major cities use methods other than incineration. They also say other treatment methods are significantly cheaper.

The sewerage agency, one of the largest in the country, is preparing to build a \$400 million incinerator that it says would be the largest of its kind in the world. It would be located at either the Newark plant or in Bayonne.

The authority serves 35 municipalities in Essex, Passaic, Bergen and Hudson counties, including the state's three largest cities, Newark, Jersey City and Paterson. The incinerator is scheduled to open by 1996.

Sludge from the agency is now dumped in the Atlantic Ocean at a site 106 miles off the Jersey Shore. By law that must stop by 1991. Afterwards, the sludge will be shipped by truck to landfills in Pennsylvania.

Officials at the sewerage commission gave different reasons why the agency must build the incinerator.

"We don't want to, but we can't avoid it," said Carmine Perrapato, executive director of the sewerage commission.

He said the sludge is contaminated with unusual amounts of heavy metals and other toxic materials because of the large number of industrial customers. That prevents using composting methods as is done elsewhere, he said.

He could not elaborate other than to say the matter had been examined by consultants.

Later, Frank D'Ascenzio, the commission's manager of industrial and pollution control, said composting has not yet been ruled out. But he said incineration is the preferred method because of the limited time the agency has to develop a new disposal method.

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